



# MAINTAINING FACE

**Tim Mclean and Justin Tao share their tips for preserving the culture of face in the Chinese office place while at the same time ensuring it does not jeopardise productivity.**

One of the first things that westerners learn about Chinese culture is the importance of keeping face. Public embarrassment or humiliation, which is what it means to lose face, is something people in any culture try to avoid, but in China and North Asia it is an absolute imperative to keep face. The more senior you are the more important it is to keep face and the easier it is to lose it.

In many ways this is a very positive cultural value. It means that people will work hard to live up to commitments they have made and keep their word.

However to create a true lean continuous improvement culture sometimes you need to be prepared to lose face. This means accepting and embracing problems and failings in your organisation. It also means listening to junior staff when they highlight problems or deficiencies in your business and it means admitting when you are wrong or when you do not know the answer.

## **The Problems with always Maintaining Face**

In China we find organisations are very hierarchical and we generally need to work through every level of the organisation make change. However we all know that there is knowledge at every level of your organisation that can help improve your performance and bottom line.

***The role of managers in a lean organisation is therefore not to be the experts on how to solve every problem or opportunity, but to empower people to identify and solve these problems.***

Often there is fear on the part of supervisors that if the operators can find problems and make improvements then the manager will think the supervisor is not doing his job. Therefore the

operators will often not say anything about the improvement opportunities they see and the business will suffer. Changing this requires a different approach from managers.

When faced with problems, managers need to go from the “Five Who’s” to the “Five Why’s”. Rather than asking who made the mistake and who should be punished, the manager should ask why the problem occurred and what is the root cause and how we can learn from the mistake to prevent it occurring again.

This approach gives focus on the work (process) and on the problems to solve, avoiding the chase for guilt and keeps the responsibility (ownership, authority) with whoever is performing the job.

## **When “No Problem” is a Problem**

This is not to suggest changing Asian culture, but rather using incentives and changing attitudes so that “maintaining face” does not stand in the way of communication and effective improvement. Supervisors should be praised not criticised for highlighting problems in their area and for encouraging their team to do the same. This shows that they know what is going on in their area and are actively looking for ways to improve. They should be supported to work with their teams to solve the problems themselves rather than just passing them on to managers or engineers to solve. Operators should be rewarded for good ideas and for highlighting problems, particularly when they relate to quality, safety or reliability.

On the other hand, a supervisor that says everything is perfect and he has no problems needs to be challenged to find some problems! They need to demonstrate that they are talking to their team about what the problems are and where improvement can be made. Perhaps production targets for the “problem free” department need to be increased and inventory reduced to expose the hidden problems. Supervisors who are not comfortable with allowing their team to speak about their issues in front of managers need to be coached and encouraged to change their behaviour.

## **Using face as a lever to create change**

The concept of face has many positive aspects. One thing we find in China is enthusiasm that teams have to “be the best”. Therefore if one team is seen to be successful through implementing lean, then the other teams will want to compete and catch up so that they do not lose face when compared to the lean team. This means that once the initial improvement breakthrough occurs, you can achieve rapid improvement if you provide the right encouragement and foster a spirit of friendly competition.

## **A Final Word**

The concept of “maintaining face” is a core Asian cultural value and can be a very positive influence in life and business in Asia. It is very important that the concept of face is respected. Criticism needs to be given positively in the context of making something good better rather than just talking about what is bad. The efforts of managers and the team as individuals need to be recognised even if the results may not meet the standard needed right now. While this may seem counter-intuitive to westerners who are used to being very blunt in their criticism, the consequence of failing to respect a person’s face is that you will not be respected yourself. Then, even if you are making valid criticisms and comments, they will unlikely be acted on.

Maintaining face is important and worthwhile and westerners should respect this. However to be successful in lean and continuous improvement, Asian managers need to redefine face to encourage people at all levels in their businesses to raise and solve problems. Managers who seek to maintain face by having “no problems” may be the biggest barrier to your business improving its performance and bottom line. \*

*\*Tim Mclean is the Managing Director of lean manufacturing consultancy TXM. The firm’s Shanghai office opened in 2009. Tim has more than 20 years in operational and general management roles in a wide range of manufacturing industries. Justin Tao is TXM’s China Consulting Director.*